

CHAPTER SEVEN

We got the word at one o'clock that night. Without hesitating we all loaded into my jeep, which had windows now, and headed out of the valley. During the twenty minute trip to Rick's house we hardly spoke, though Emily cried softly most of the way there. We left Auntie Mae home, sick with the flu. Several vehicles had already parked in the yard when we arrived. One of them belonged to a Pike County Sheriff's deputy; another, to a funeral home. Moab had arrived, and we recognized Fred Majors' pickup.

Two men carried the body out on a stretcher as we parked the car. A deputy sheriff talked to Rick on the front porch. "Sure, he was upset, especially about the things that Rathwell girl said, but we never thought he was going to do something like this. He just wasn't the sort of kid who would hurt himself or anybody else."

"Tell me again what happened."

"I told you three times already; are you deaf, or do they train you all to be stupid? He left the house about 9:00 o'clock, said he'd be back in an hour or so. When he still wasn't back by 11:00, I went out looking for him. I found him on a hunting trail on the north slope, like I showed you. I carried his body back here, and called you."

"Well, you should have left the body lay, Rick, but I guess I can understand how you feel. You understand the coroner will have to investigate and do an autopsy. It's routine."

"Yeah, yeah, I know all that. I have to get to the funeral home and make some arrangements."

Emily went inside the house to be with Alberta; her father, Moab, met her as she came in, on his way outside. They hugged each other wordlessly, and Moab came on over to greet me, his big face a study of grief and confusion. "Such a fine young boy, Hank. It just don't make sense. We saw him on Christmas day, and he was laughing and enjoying himself along with everybody else. Rick – hold on a minute."

Moab and I both went with Rick to the funeral home. way over in South Williamson. They had opened for the emergency, and he needed to sign the necessary papers and make some preliminary plans. We took my Cherokee, the best vehicle for the frozen roads we had to cross.

I could think of little to say that might comfort my wife's uncle and my good friend. Most of the trip we passed in silence, but Rick did make clear whom he thought carried the blame for what had happened. "I liked Bonnie, I really did, but she's turned into a real witch. How anyone could believe the lies that daughter of hers told I'll never understand. I hold the two of them responsible for what happened to my little boy."

"Wait a minute, Brother," I interrupted. "Don't let Satan lure you into that trap. If you give way to bitterness and unforgiveness, you could end up destroying yourself and your whole family. Let's leave any judgment in the Lord's hands."

We talked about the blame game the rest of the way. I didn't think I convinced Rick, and Moab didn't help; he just sat there in the back seat, silent. Rick broke down and cried before we pulled into the funeral home lot, and I thought that was a good sign. Inside the funeral home, he was very subdued; getting upset only when they wouldn't let him see the body.

Because of the autopsy, we didn't get to have the funeral until five days later. The coroner ruled, of course, that the death resulted from suicide, though Rick still had his own opinion. The sun shone brightly on the day

of the services, but it was bitterly cold. A large crowd filled the church, with many people standing along the sides of the sanctuary. Bonnie and Hammond Rathwell attended, but not Kay. I could tell from the expression on Rick's face that the Rathwells weren't welcome, but he could hardly tell them to leave.

Rev. Parkman gave an uncustomarily quiet and gentle message about the healing of wounds, and the sanctity of life. Unlike our old Freewill church, this one didn't have several preachers to stand up and give sermons, and the service ended in about an hour. Most who came for the funeral service followed the procession out to the family cemetery for the burial. Somehow the diggers had managed to break through the frozen ground on the top to dig the hole; frozen chunks of dirt lay around the grave site.

When the men lowered the coffin into the ground, Bonnie came over to where we stood, and laid her hand on Rick's arm. He stiffened when he saw her; his mouth opened and closed again. Bonnie spoke quietly, but those of us standing nearby could hear what she said.

"Kay told me the truth, finally, Rick. I know it's too late for that now, but I know that she seduced your son, not the other way around. I am *so* sorry for all the mean, ugly things I said about Nate. If I could do *anything* to bring him back, I would. I ask your forgiveness both for me and my daughter. I hope when you've had time to think and pray about it, you can find it in your heart to grant us forgiveness."

Rick still said nothing, but turned his head away, toward me. I saw new tears streaming down his face as Bonnie walked away. I knew the Lord had already started to work in him, and that the forgiveness would come.

The new year came, before we even had the funeral. Emily and I passed our first New Year's Eve together quietly, sitting before the fireplace in the living room. Mae Mae had gone out to visit friends again; she spent more nights away from home now than in all the years I knew her before, and I loved her all the more for it. Christmas had been a time of quiet joy, with a play at the church and a *large* Bloomington family gathering on the afternoon of Christmas day.

We found a measure of relief from tragedy when classes started again. We had lost three students and gained one, so we now had thirteen. Liz recovered fully from the attack on her, and seemed even stronger in her faith. Among the remaining students we encountered no resentments or hard feelings, and no open rebellion, at least none that we could see. Pam truly loved both her students and her work. She and Lamar had postponed their wedding plans for a few months, partly because of the problems connected with Kay and Nate, partly because Lamar was taking a Bible school course with the idea of entering some sort of ministry. They set a new date in May, after the end of school.

Pam's students loved her as much as she loved them. Just as my favorite was Liz, hers was Carmen. The child had a knack of lighting up any room she entered, and she knew no strangers. The idea someone might carry her off concerned Pat and Fred, but she told them patiently she would accept no rides or gifts from strangers – unless someone she knew was there with them. Her boundless energy and unfailing optimism gave us all a lift in the dark days of that sad winter.

We spent a lot of time with Rick and Alberta in the months after Nate's death. Ever so gradually, Rick accepted the notion that life must still go on, and that he couldn't carry around a load of resentment and bitterness. One of the most touching moments in the life of our church came in February, around Valentine's Day, when Bonnie and Hammond Rathwell returned to our fellowship. At the end of the service, Rick and Alberta sought them out, and all four of them spent a time of hugging and crying, healing and forgiveness. They brought Kacee back to the church with them, but not Kay.

When they returned home, Kay had gone, run off with a new lover she found. She had wanted an abortion, but Bonnie and Hammond wouldn't hear of it. They feared that she had run away to do just that. Six weeks later, she called them from California, to tell them she had indeed aborted the baby. She had married her boy

friend, and she told them not to bother to look for her. Bonnie left for the west coast the next day; three weeks later, she returned, with her daughter in tow. The boy friend had dumped her, and she was living on the streets when Bonnie found her.

Life had stripped away Bonnie's pride, but nothing could shake her faith. She continued to attend church every Sunday and Wednesday, her head still held high. Outside of her husband and the Lord, her chief support during this new crisis came from Rick and Alberta Bloomington. They took Kay under their wing, bringing her into their home to spend time with them and their brood. Alberta even took some time away from her own very busy life as mother and wife to take Kay out alone with her, just to talk and "get away." Fred and Pat had long ago settled their resentment against Kay, and they went so far as to take Liz to visit the Rathwell home. To the astonishment of the rest of us, the two girls became firm friends.

Liz described to Emily and I what happened. "I prayed for Kay for a long time, since before we had our fight. Even when she said all of those awful things about poor Nate, and when she ran off to get an abortion, I still prayed for her. When Mommy and Daddy finally said we could go visit, I was a little bit scared of what might happen, but I knew the Lord would be with me.

"When we drove into the yard, Bonnie came out to meet us, but no one else. The rest of them were inside playing some sort of game, but they stopped when we came in. Kay wouldn't look at me when I spoke to her, and she looked pretty sad. I got a chair and went and sat beside her while the grown-ups talked. For a while, we just sat there, until finally I figured I should say something.

"Kay, I just want you to know I love you. I've been praying for you, and I believe that some day we can be friends."

"She started crying, and said, 'How could you love me? I almost killed you; I *wanted* to kill you. I was sure you must really hate me, like everyone else does, after all the things I've done.'"

"No, I could never hate you, not and still be a Christian," I told her. "None of us in the church hate you; Mommy and Daddy told me Rick and Alberta have been real nice to you. God loves you, too, Kay, and He wants to accept you as His child, if you'll let Him. He's already forgiven you for all the things you did; all you have to do is accept His forgiveness."

"Well, the grown-ups heard what we said, and we all had a prayer with Kay right there in the living room. Even little Kacee prayed with us. Kay asked Jesus into her heart right then, and He came, like He always does. Kay has been a different person ever since, and we plan to spend a lot of time together."

And spend time together they did, every weekend and many evenings after school. Kay joined the Bible study group and attended the Sunday school class for new Christians. In just over six months, she had gone from the Bad Girl of our church family to one of our most devout young Christians. She was only sixteen years old, and had lived through a life time of trouble already.

Our season of sorrows had not yet passed, though. In May, our long-time pastor and friend, Broaddus Parkman, died. He had started the Shady Grove Community Church in his old age, because he thought the other churches in the area didn't meet the needs of the people of the community. Our little congregation of fifty was stricken at the news of his passing, and uncertain what to do or where to turn. Unlike some other churches, we had no other preachers in the congregation who could fill the gap. None of us felt competent to step into those very large shoes.

We began looking outside the church for a new pastor. The adults of the church appointed four of us as a pastor search committee. Besides me, the committee included Moab Bloomington, Fred Majors, and Mae Mae. We met at Auntie Mae's house that Sunday evening, after the church elected us. After prayer, we sat around discussing possibilities. A wild idea occurred to me, but I put it aside. A few minutes later, it popped

up again, more insistent.

"I know this must sound crazy, but the person that keeps coming to my mind, no matter how much I try to push it away, is Lamar Leighton."

"*Yes!*" shouted Fred, slapping his knee. "I thought the same thing, but I was afraid to say it."

It didn't take long to discover that the Lord had spoken the same word to each of us. We would still have to convince Lamar that he was the right man for the job. We didn't expect an easy time with that.

"He's at Pam's house right now. Why don't we call and ask him – and Pam, of course – to come over?" I suggested. The rest of them agreed this sounded like a good idea, so I went to the phone and dialed Pam's number. He must have wondered what I wanted, but he and Pam came on over. The sight of the pastor search committee made him uneasy, I could tell, but he didn't really react until we put our proposal to him.

"But, Hank, I haven't even finished Bible school. I spent most of my life, until last fall, outside the church. Why, a lot of the members of the church have been Christians longer than I've been alive."

:"We know all of that, Brother, but the Lord gave us all the same answer to our question. We believe you're the man God has for this ministry."

Fifteen minutes later, he still wasn't convinced. I didn't want to push him into it. "Well, do this for me, Brother," I finally told him. "Talk it over with Pam, pray about it, and get back to us. I know this is all very sudden for you. We'll give you all the time you need to make up your mind. If you pray through, and still don't believe the Lord would have you do this, we'll all accept that."

As we went our separate ways that evening, we felt confident that the Lord had led us to the right man. Whether or not Lamar could see that depended on what happened between him and the Lord. Emily, Mae Mae and I had our own prayer for Lamar, for his future bride, and for our church.

The next morning, Pam showed up at school with a broad smile on her face. I didn't even have to ask; I just gave her a big hug, and said, "Praise the Lord, Pam! We just knew he was God's man."

She responded, "We wanted to know if he could wait until after our honeymoon."

"Of course, you wild woman, you! As a matter of fact, Emily and I still haven't had ours. Maybe we'll take off about the same time, right Baby?"

School ended on May 25 and we had our first graduate, Polly Bloomington. She had been admitted as a student in Southwest West Virginia Community College. On May 27, Lamar Leighton and Pam Strader Bullitt were married; a preacher from another local church performed the ceremony. When they left on their honeymoon, the next day, Emily and I left as well, both couples for parts unknown.